

7-1-1993

# An Italian-American Girlhood in Iowa's Coal Country

Edith Gallo Widmer Blake

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest>

Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Widmer Blake, Edith G. "An Italian-American Girlhood in Iowa's Coal Country." *The Palimpsest* 74 (1993), 118-126.  
Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol74/iss3/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Palimpsest by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).



# An Italian-American Girlhood in Iowa's Coal Country

*by Edith Gallo Widmer Blake*



Author (in chair) and siblings grew up amidst the dangers as well as the childhood delights of coal mining and rural life in an Italian-American family in southern Iowa. From left, Josephine, Pete, Frances, Edith, and Angelina Gallo (brothers Joe and Nick are not in the picture). Circa 1912.

COURTESY THE AUTHOR



I WAS BORN one cold December night in 1910, in Number 30 Coal Camp near Centerville, Iowa. In our community, coal miners' wives and relatives all helped deliver the babies, but the next day a doctor was reached, and he came out to check on mother and baby.

I was placed in a large shoe box all lined with cotton, and set in back of the coal stove. I was kept there, cleaned and fed, until I became a little stronger. But with good and loving care and God's will, I survived.

All the homes in this mining camp had four rooms. Here, within those four rooms, lived my father, mother, three boys, and four girls. There was one bedroom for the girls, one for the boys, one for the parents, and one large kitchen (for cooking, dining, and laundry). Families with fewer children might also have a nice parlor. Each house had a small garden plot in the back, and a "back house," or outside toilet. Some of the families had an extra shed where they housed roomers or boarders. In this way they would make extra money to help pay bills and feed their families. There were only two wells in camp. All the women and children pumped the water and carried it in large pails. It was used for drinking, bathing, and laundry, which was usually done twice a week.

My siblings and I were all born in America, but my father was from Italy. Many of the miners in the area were from Italy. Others were from Yugoslavia and were called Austrians in those days. Later they were called Croatians and then Yugoslavians (and now Croatians again). A father would come from the Old Country first, and send for his wife and children when he could. There was no government aid, so relatives would help each other.

I remember this mining camp so well. There were about thirty houses, a schoolhouse, a pool hall, a company store, and a union hall. The union hall was a nice, big building where miners held their union meetings and we held our Saturday night dances. The fathers usually stayed home and played cards with their friends, but all the mothers would take their children to the dance regardless of how young they were. There were benches all around the hall where we sat and watched the dancers.

I would always listen closely to the music,

and if I liked a song I would ask the musicians for the title. They would tell me, and I'd tell my brother. The next time he would go into town he would get the sheets with the words. That's how I learned most of my songs. I loved to sing. When I was very young and small, I learned all the beautiful Italian songs from my parents, Frank and Antonia Gallo. I'd stand in the middle of the dining room table and sing to all my family.

THE COMPANY STORE in our camp carried everything from meats to dry goods to candy. In the morning a man would come out to the homes to get orders for groceries. He would deliver them in the afternoon by horse and wagon. We charged the groceries, and then on payday Mom would go in and pay the grocery bill, and the owner would always give her a big bag of free candy.

Once a year or so we went into Centerville, which was only five miles away but seemed like a hundred then. There we would buy hardware and other articles that the peddler or our company store didn't carry. Our shoes and coats were mostly ordered from "wish books" (Sears, Roebuck or Montgomery Ward catalogs.) Underwear for the girls was made from new floursack material. Shoes were resoled by Dad and handed down from child to child. I was the last daughter so it was many years before I got a brand new pair of shoes. Our bare feet were so toughened we could almost walk on nails and not feel it.

Our schoolhouse was a large two-room school, filled with children up to grade eight. Here we learned to read and write, and how to love and respect this country. Each morning we all stood and recited the Pledge of Allegiance and sang "My Country 'tis of Thee." That was such a beautiful time of day.

Special school activities included plays, box socials, and a yearly contest for the most popular girl. The only punishment I remember was sending a child to the corner. I can't remember what I did wrong, but my teacher said I should stand in the corner. I don't know what I would



have done if the children had laughed at me standing in the corner. I was so humiliated that I told the teacher I would throw a book at her if she made me stand there. She must have recognized how upset I was because she let me go back to my seat.

I'll always remember an old man coming to our school on payday. Although he had no wife or children, he loved children very much. He would ask our teacher to line us up two-by-two and parade us to the nearby grocery store where he would buy us all some candy. So naturally we all loved him too.

Most of the people in this little mining camp were Catholic and our church was about three miles away. We had no transportation so we seldom went to church. Once in a while we children went to the Baptist church with some of the farmers who lived nearby. We all knew there was a God up above who watched over us whether we got to church or not.

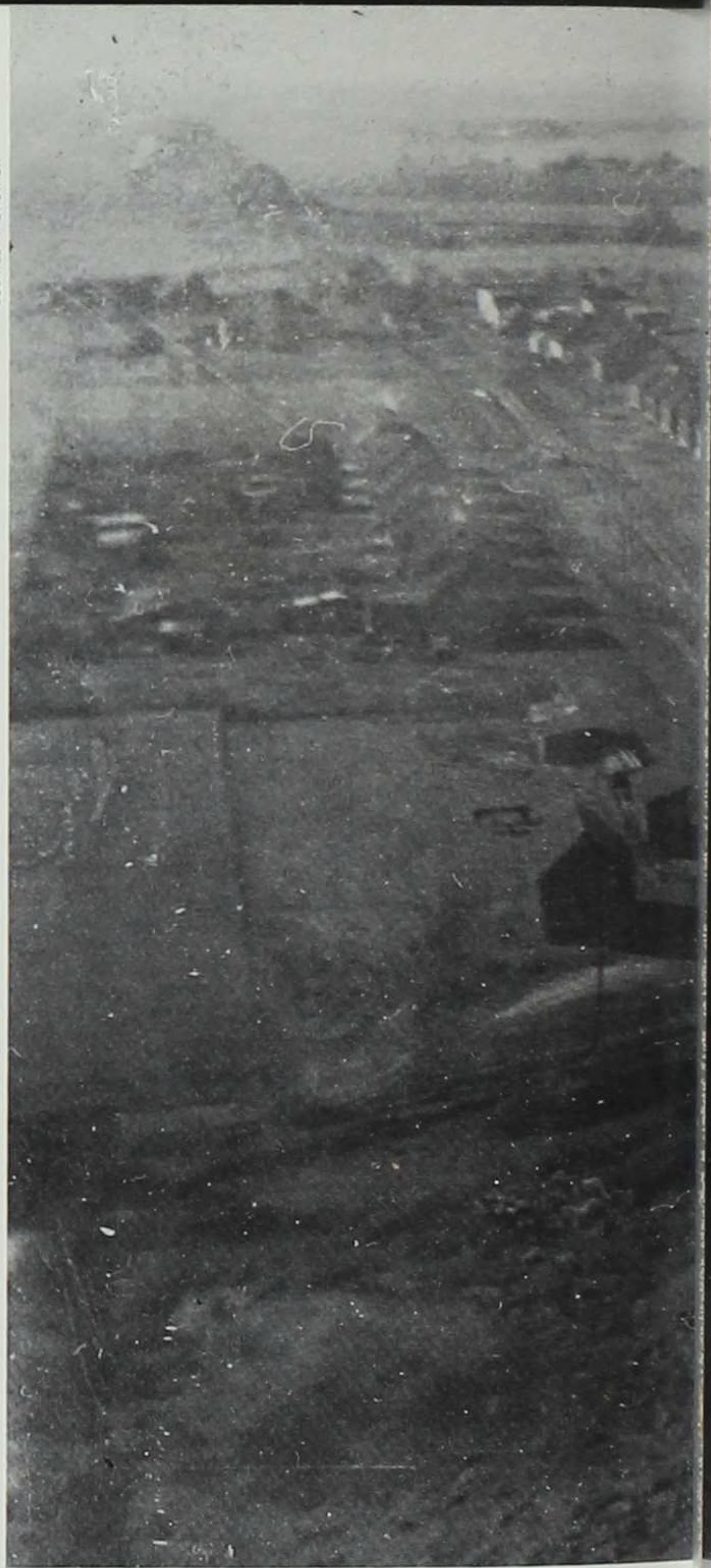
**M**Y FATHER and the other coal miners in our camp worked Number 30 Mine. I can still see the big chimneys bellowing smoke. They burned coal to run the steam-driven machinery housed in a big building. The mules and ponies were kept in a big barn when they weren't pulling carts of coal underground.

Near the other end of the mine was a building with a huge wheel always going around and around. This wheel turned a great fan, to keep the air circulating in the mine. Each time I saw this wheel stop, I'd panic for fear that the miners would not get enough air. But somehow they always got out in time. Then the wheel would be repaired. The air in the mines often contained large amounts of carbon dioxide, which was very dangerous. A man went down to check the air with a safety lantern before the miners entered.

Iowa mines were 150 to 200 feet deep. An elevator, or "cage," hoisted all the miners and the coal from the mine below. The mine also had stairs so the men could escape in case the elevator broke down.

The cage hauled the coal up to the surface,

COURTESY THE AUTHOR



where it was sorted and loaded into boxcars. All the large, clean coal was sold. The dirty coal (which contained too much sulfur) and the small pieces were dumped onto a huge dirt dump. From this pile the camp children gathered coal to fill our families' coal sheds after school and on weekends. A big cart ran on a railroad track to the very top of this dump. The sides of the cart would open up and coal would pour down onto the huge pile. We had to listen





for the whistle telling us the cart was coming up, and then run for our lives because the coal would roll very far. No one was ever hurt though. We learned early how to protect ourselves. We even made up games of gathering the coal while we worked, and then we hauled it home in our buckets or wagons. It was a good feeling to see the shed fill up.

In the evening we would go outside and look at the coal dump. Somehow the sulfur would

**Albert, Siro, and Fred Sacco and Pete Gallo stand atop the dump. Below them is Number 30 Coal Camp—thirty houses, a schoolhouse, pool hall, company store, union hall, and the mining operation. The boys stand to the left of the railroad tracks, which carried carts of inferior coal to the top of this dump. Miners' children gathered coal from the dump to heat their homes.**



ignite, and there would be hundreds of little fires burning and crackling. There were no lights anywhere, just complete darkness, except for the fires on the dump.

**W**HENEVER A MINER was hurt, a shrill whistle would blow. All the wives would run to see who had gotten hurt. Our mother told us to always have clean sheets and pillow cases on our beds so that if someone was hurt there would be a clean bed for him. Sometimes the doctor had to be called.

My mother told us about her first husband, a young man of twenty-five with three small children. He went to work early one cold February morning. He was standing near the cage, waiting for the engineer to blow the whistle to signal the opening of the gate so the miners could get in and go down into the mine. No one could see anything because of the blowing snow and the steam rising from the shaft. The little carbon lamps on their caps blew out. Somehow the engineer did not judge correctly, and the cage went above their heads. When my mother's husband heard the gate open, he stepped into the area where he thought the cage was. He fell into the elevator shaft and was killed instantly.

The men went to work at 7 A.M. carrying lunch pails and buckets of drinking water. Little carbon lamps attached to their caps provided their only light underground. Mother always put a banana in Dad's lunch pail, but he never ate it. He saved it for me, explaining that there was a banana tree down in the mine. I was very young and for a time I believed him.

But when I was around twelve years old I had a better understanding of the mine where he worked. One Sunday afternoon, the young men took the girls down into the mine and showed us how our fathers made a living for us. There was coal on all sides as we walked down a little narrow path. We saw wooden poles supporting the walls and ceiling. They took us to where our dad worked. With miners' picks in hand, they got down on their knees, as Dad



**Miners' homes were four-room structures set on blocks, without electricity or plumbing. One well served many families. Miners' wives often took in boarders, to supplement husbands' and sons' seasonal wages.**

would do to dig the coal. All the digging was being done by hand at that time; no machinery was used.

The miners came home at 4 P.M. all covered with soot. We would have hot water ready, heated in a tank attached to our coal stove. My dad and the boarders washed up and changed into clean clothes and then sat around until suppertime. We children always helped Mother cook and set the table. The men would eat first, then all of the children.

In the evenings when the weather was warming up, our family sat on the porch to watch the moon and the Big Dipper and to look for falling stars. Friends and neighbors came by.



Dad would make everyone keep quiet while I sang all the love songs I knew that were connected with moonlight and stars. I felt like an opera singer with a good audience.

**B**Y THE TIME I was about four years old, we had moved to a twelve-acre farm only a block from the mining camp. Dad worked in the mine in the winter and cared for the farm in the summer. Even the ponies that pulled the carts had a break from mining. In the springtime when the mine was closed, they were let out to run free in the sunshine and fresh air. We kids would watch them for hours at a time.

After spending so much time in our four-room miner's house, this eight-room farm house was like a palace to us. We were so proud of our big house and land, and we finally had a well of our own. Dad was especially proud of his orchard and took good care of his fruit trees. I remember one beautiful morning when the apple orchard was in bloom. Standing by our kitchen door, I could hear the chickens cackling, the cows mooing, and the birds singing. Even the dogs' barking sounded happier. I was so taken by the beauty of the scene that I began to sing "O Sole Mio," an old Italian song that means "Oh, My Sunshine."

Spring housecleaning was quite an experience. Everyone helped, and we worked on one room a day. Beds, springs, mattresses, and rugs all came out for sun and air. The rugs were thrown over a wire clothes line. It was fun to watch the dust trail away as we whacked them with a rug beater. The mattresses were also cleaned, and the bedsprings were washed with kerosene to keep bedbugs away. Everything smelled so fresh and clean when we all went to bed exhausted.

After the curtains had been washed and stretched on curtain stretchers, the house would be clean for Easter time. On Easter Sunday we would color eggs with boiled red beet juice, or with boiled tree bark, which made a brown dye.

Mother always made new dresses for all four

girls. They were usually made of voile or organdy bought from "Sam the Peddler." Sam came by about once a month with a couple of suitcases full of ready-made clothes and some material goods. He never carried a tape measure. He would put one end of the material near his nose and then stretch his arm out to mark one yard. Where did we go in our pretty new holiday clothes? Nowhere! But our friends all came over and we played in the orchard and all around the farm.

"Company day" was always Sunday afternoon. After we washed the noon dishes, we would curl our hair with a curling iron heated over a kerosene lamp, put on our prettiest dresses, and then be all ready for company. For a "spit curl" we would wet our hair with sugar water, and *pronto!*—a nice, stiff curl on the side of our faces.

School always closed in May so we could help plant the gardens and do the spring work. The barnyard manure had to be spread over the earth, and then the plowing, spading, and planting had to be done. One spring evening Dad said we should all go to bed early because he wanted us to get up before dawn to watch the beautiful sunrise. I could hardly sleep thinking about it, and we were all up by 4 A.M. Lo and behold, the sunrise was beautiful! But Dad had really gotten us up early so we could plant potatoes before it got too warm in the hot sun.

Each cow on our farm had her own name and her own personality. "Nellie" was kind; "Bossy" ran the barnyard. "Red" was a strange cow. She had a habit of going around in circles when we milked her. "Farmlife" was a beautiful black and white cow, but she was killed by lightning. Watching the cattle graze in the pasture made me feel calm and serene.

From the cows' milk, Mother made cheese. First, she filled a large dishpan with rich milk. Then she added little white pills and set the pan on the far end of the cook stove, where the milk would stay warm as it thickened. She always set a coffee cup in the milk. When the cup left an indentation in the thickened milk, it was ready to be made into cheese. With her hands she stirred it ever so slowly, and then drained it in the colander. I remember rows of round, white cheeses resting on big boards as





"We were so proud of our big house and land," the author writes, "and we finally had a well of our own." The eight-room house (above) better served the needs of a family with seven children than had the four-room miner's house in the coal camp. The twelve-acre farm included an orchard, garden, and vineyard.

the air circulated around them. Once aged, it was ready to eat—a nice, white, mild cheese with a hard crust.

With summer came different activities. We worked in the garden and picked up coal to fill the sheds for next winter. On Sundays we played, or walked through the woods, or watched the older boys play baseball. Each mining camp had a baseball team of its own, and the teams often played against each other. Pulling for our brothers and friends was great family fun.

The fathers always played that old Italian game called *boccie ball*. Every Sunday, weather permitting, they would all gather and really enjoy themselves. They constructed a big court, like a tennis court, made from the cinders of burned coal.

The mothers were all happy to just relax. They sat under the shade trees, visiting. Other

times they gathered for "coffee clutches." They all seemed happy and content. Later the men might get together to play cards and drink homemade wine. They would end up singing beautiful Italian songs. There was always someone around who could play an instrument, usually an accordion. It was a pleasure to just sit and listen.

**W**ORKING ALONGSIDE DAD on the farm, we were taught how to do things right. In the early evening we carried water to the garden in dry spells. As summer advanced, we gathered rhubarb, berries, cherries, and other



fruits (to can or make into jams and jellies) and, later, garden vegetables.

Mom saved eggs to set under our setting hen and in the incubators. We enjoyed watching the mama hens sitting on their eggs even though the hens did not allow us to come near without pecking at us. When the chicks were ready to hatch, Mother would put an egg next to her ear and listen, then tap it a little. It would crack and out came the baby chick. Then it was our turn to care for them. We watered and fed them every day and cleaned their houses.

Never a Fourth of July went by when the children did not have their own little flags to display. We were all very proud to be Americans. At night we climbed to the top of the old coal dump and watched all the fireworks in Centerville.

As summer ended, we anxiously awaited the grape-picking days that lay ahead. We always had a vineyard with long rows of colorful Concord grapes. Even the shape of the grape stems that held each little grape was beautiful. We ate the best ones, and the next best ones were used to make jelly. We boiled the grapes, strained them, added a cup of sugar for each cup of juice, and poured it into odd-sized glasses and jars. A layer of hot paraffin preserved it. Later it was great fun to lift out the paraffin to reveal this lovely jelly.

My dad also made wine from the leftover grapes, adding smaller but sweeter California grapes that he had ordered. Together they made great Italian-style wine, not too sour, not too sweet. I remember the men in high, rubber boots, mashing the grapes in laundry tubs. After fermenting in the cool cellar for several days, it would be strained, put into barrels, and set aside. Drinking it too soon would make one awfully sick. By Christmas the wine would be clear and ready to enjoy.

After the first wine had been made, sugar and water were added to the remaining grapes and left to stand and ferment again. This was called the "second wine." It was very weak, and we kids drank this kind. It tasted like grape juice. I don't believe it contained any alcohol. After all of the first wine was gone, everyone felt lucky to have some second wine around.

Drinking wine was quite a delicacy, something to be sipped during or after each meal or

when company came. I can still see Dad with his glass of red wine at lunch or dinner. Our Italian breads and pastas tended to keep the wines in the stomach longer, absorbing the alcohol and keeping it from entering the blood stream.

During Prohibition, we weren't allowed to have any wine, even for our own use. So Dad decided to bury some barrels. The freeze came earlier than expected that year and the barrels froze. We lost all of our wine. This was a very sad thing to happen to an Italian family.

We also made our own home brew, from hops, sugar, and water. We let the beer brew for three weeks, then bottled it. We kids had the job of putting on the lids with a pressure machine. When the children wanted some to drink, my dad put a red-hot poker into a glass of this beer. This would burn all the alcohol out.

AUTUMN ALSO BROUGHT sausage-making time, a period of long, hard work and comradeship. The slaughtered pig was hung on a big, strong pipe stretched between two trees so the blood would drain out. (Yugoslavsians saved the blood and made blood sausage, but not the Italians.) Next the pig was skinned and cut into pieces. Meanwhile, in the house the ladies were cleaning utensils. The pig intestines we had purchased for sausage casings were now washed and turned inside out. We mixed small pieces of pork with beef and spices, ground it all together, and then stuffed it into a dry, clean casing. Now we had one large salami, three to four feet long, or shorter ones, about a foot long. Tied with string, the salamis were hung to dry on a ladder for a month in a room with even temperatures to prevent spoilage.

We also made sausage of pure pork. The filled casings were put in fifteen-gallon crocks, and melted lard was poured over them to preserve them. These were never eaten raw; they had to be cooked.

Halloween was celebrated by the boys tip-



ping down the back houses. Another prank involved standing outside someone's window with a spool of thread and a piece of string. Pulling the string against the spool a certain way made a high, whining sound. These seemed to be the orneriest things the boys could think of to do. The girls never went out.

By this time, our cellar was full of food and wine for the winter months ahead. Rows of jars held jams, vegetables, fruits, and meats. Big crocks held sauerkraut, green peppers, and pickled cucumbers. With all this, plus barrels of wine and sausages, we felt our winter meals were pretty well taken care of. Winter hunting and trapping for jack rabbits, geese, pheasant, squirrel, mink, weasel, and fox would fill any remaining needs.

On winter evenings we would sit around the coal stove to hear Dad tell about his life. He spoke about his young days when he lived in Italy, and later as an Italian soldier in Africa. Later he and his brothers had left Italy for Canada, and then to the United States. They came through Chicago when there was a world's fair going on in the late 1800s, and he described the food shortages of the economic depression.

We never had a Christmas tree, but oh, was it fun waiting for Santa Claus to fill our stockings! We used our mother's long cotton stockings because they would stretch a lot. On Christmas morning, they would be filled with oranges, apples, nuts, and small gifts like new hankies. Our best gift would be resting on the top (mine was always a doll). Our boarders always dropped pennies and dimes into our stockings. Deep down inside we would find a piece of coal mixed in with the presents. That meant that we had been naughty.

On New Year's Eve neighborhood boys came over and we would roast chestnuts and dance to music on our "talking machine," or phonograph. At midnight everyone went outside to greet the new year. The louder the noise, the better. The boys would shoot off fireworks.

On Valentine's Day, we pasted pictures from the catalogs onto paper lace doilies cut into heart shapes. These we gave to our teachers. For someone very dear we made little handkerchiefs trimmed with scraps of gingham or percale or with crocheted edges.

**I**N THE LATE 1920s our coal mine closed and so did many others in the area. That left around one hundred families with no jobs. The camp houses were torn down, and all the miners had to leave to find work. My parents decided to stay on their little farm, but my sisters and I left to find jobs.

Many of our relatives and friends went to Kenosha, Wisconsin. They found work in the Simmons bedspring factory and an automobile assembly plant. Others went to Chicago. My two eldest brothers helped build the subway system there.

The rest of our relatives all went to Chicago's suburban North Shore area. There the men found jobs as gardeners, carpenters, or chauffeurs for wealthy people. The women did house cleaning and took in laundry at home. Young girls worked as cooks or maids in wealthy homes.

I was a teenager when I worked as a maid and I loved it. I prepared appetizers and other food. I only made twelve dollars a week, but my maid's uniform was furnished. My expenses were few: new shoes or a pretty dress once in a while. My sisters and I sent money to our parents to help with their expenses. Everyone helped each other; relatives and friends all lived nearby.

Anyone who would do labor never suffered because there were always wealthy families who needed us. Every once in a while during the Great Depression we would hear of a suicide by one of the wealthy people who had apparently lost a lot of money. We felt fortunate because, being poor, we never lost anything during the depression, and there was always work for us.

In 1930 I married an Iowa miner. Here on the North Shore we worked on a farm owned by wealthy people, so we were able to continue giving milk, chickens, and vegetables to our relatives who lived in Chicago.

In 1939 my husband and I built our own house, where we raised our two children. I still live in that two-story house with its beautiful hardwood floors. But I still remember the four-room miner's house in the Iowa coal camp where I was born. □